

## Preface to the Series “Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual”

The present publication is the first of five volumes of the proceedings of the conference “Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual” that was held from 29 September to 2 October 2008 in Heidelberg, and organised by the Collaborative Research Centre “Ritual Dynamics” or SFB 619. This research programme was established in 2002 by the German Research Council (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*), and has since then focused on a number of crucial questions in ritual studies, for example, how are rituals created and how do they come to disappear? How is it that they are transformed or transferred from one religion, region, or time period to another? Who invents rituals? Who are the agents of rituals?

Ritual dynamics can be observed on several levels. Looking at the level of the dynamics of history, ritual dynamics become apparent in the tension between the poles of old versus new, traditional versus modern, and regional versus global. On the level of social dynamics, they arise from the tension emanating from the opposition of priestly versus laicistic (for example Brahman/anti-Brahman), individual versus collective, and also from the tensions between majority and minority cultures (in the diaspora). On the structural dynamic level, they result from a change of media, for example from script to image and internet, from script to performance, from norm to event, from prescription to realisation, or from description to construction. The Heidelberg collaborative research centre is interested in such ritual movements and processes, and structural as well as functional changes.

It has now become apparent that change within and through rituals is as evident as the continuity that can be observed in many ritual practices. The ritual dynamics project has contributed significantly to this rethinking of ritual theory. To mention only a few major points:

1. Ritual criticism is not an exclusive feature of modernity, but has always been part of ritual performance. In other words: criticising the “old”, including conventional rituals, is just as much a sign of modernity or modernisation as the creation of new rituals or the rearranging of “old” action patterns.
2. The thesis that rituals degenerate or disappear in the modern Western world is unsustainable. Quite to the contrary, we learn that society plays with rituals, that rituals are part of a certain modern attitude and lifestyle, that they even persevere far away from the actual contexts of action (such as the internet). The global “experience-driven society” rediscovers and constantly reinvents rituals by combining old and new patterns, or by adopting them from different cultures.
3. The dynamics of rituals lead to many more renewals and modifications than hitherto assumed, since form is, in particular, related to variance, if not, in fact, determining it. Therefore, rituals are by no means limited to the function of excluding alternatives or abridging contingency and liberties. Instead, they must be understood as propositions

for alternatives and as symbolic actions, thus as highly productive elements for social interaction and the creation of meaning.

4. Due to their transcultural and transnational reception, and thanks to new media, traditional rituals are no longer bound to particular traditions, but hold an almost inexhaustible and increasingly global potential for the invention of new ritual practices.

Dynamics in ritual practice is therefore the rule rather than the exception. Hence the new and novel is an important, if not the most significant, indicator of rituals. Rituals are not stereotyped and invariant events; rather, if seen in their context and historical dimension, they are the cause of social and cultural change.

These and many other ideas were discussed during the Conference in more than twenty panels. They have been condensed into five volumes with 16 sections. The first volume “Grammars and Morphologies of Ritual Practices in Asia” focuses on grammars and morphologies of ritual practices in Asia (section 1), as well as on ritual discourse and ritual performance in China and Japan (section 2). Volume II “Body, Performance, Agency and Experience” covers the notions of body, performance, agency, and experience, focusing on ritual and agency (section 1), ritual, performance, and event (section 2), the body and food in ritual (section 3), and the varieties of ritual experience (section 4). The third volume “State, Power and Violence” contains contributions on state, power, and violence, with chapters on ritual and violence (section 1), rituals of power and consent (section 2), usurping rituals (section 3), and the state and ritual in India (section 4). Volume IV “Reflexivity, Media and Visuality” covers the aspects of reflexivity and discourse on ritual (section 1), ritual and media (section 2), ritual and visuality (section 3), and ritual design (section 4). The fifth and final volume “Transfer and Spaces” contains articles on ritual transfer (section 1) and ritualized space and objects of sancrosanctity (section 2).

We would like to express our sincerest thanks to the German Research Foundation, DFG, for generously funding the SFB 619 as well as for providing the financial support for hosting one of the largest conferences in humanities and cultural studies ever held at Heidelberg University, and for publishing the conference proceedings.

The editorial work would not have been possible without the tireless support of Sibylle Zerr for the printer’s copy, and Elvira Bijedic, Douglas Fear, Chris Allen, Anne Moßner and Raffaella Cengia for proofreading.

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Heidelberg, April 2010

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